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## **ASEAN & Myanmar: Litmus Test or Existential Challenge?**

*By See Seng Tan*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*Notwithstanding the progress it reportedly made, the unilateral visit by Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen to Myanmar, in his role as ASEAN Chair, has raised more questions than answers.*

### **COMMENTARY**

CAMBODIAN PRIME Minister Hun Sen's meeting with Senior General Min Aung Hlaing on 7 January 2022, ostensibly in his and Cambodia's role as the current Chair of ASEAN, has raised objections from several member states of the regional grouping. Chief amongst these is Hun Sen's reported failure to consult with his ASEAN counterparts before embarking on what was essentially a unilateral effort on his part.

There were also reservations, hinted at by Malaysia's Foreign Minister Saifuddin Abdullah, that Hun Sen's visit might be misconstrued as ASEAN's recognition and legitimisation of Min Aung Hlaing and his Myanmar State Administration Council.

### **Hun Sen's Myanmar Move: Success or Setback?**

In their meeting, Hun Sen was informed by Min Aung Hlaing that his government had extended a ceasefire with all ethnic armed organisations in the country that was originally set to expire at the end of February through the end of the year.

This was a point that was included in a joint statement released by the two leaders as an "important step ... embodied in the ASEAN Five-Point Consensus". According to Ou Virak, president of the Cambodian research group Future Forum, the Myanmar military's ceasefire with the ethnic groups was precisely what Hun Sen asked for and got.

Hun Sen's apparent success in Naypyidaw has been welcomed by some analysts as a bold move that has broken the ice with the ruling junta in Myanmar. The view among those analysts is that ASEAN's efforts to engage Myanmar have so far been ineffective and that Hun Sen's initiative, while clearly a contravention of ASEAN's consensus-driven approach, is a step in the right direction.

This is especially as far as the Five-Point Consensus, originally agreed between Min Aung Hlaing and ASEAN back in April 2021, is concerned. Despite "going cowboy" on his fellow ASEAN leaders, Hun Sen's move has in fact established a basis for dialogue where none previously existed.

### **Key Sticking Point**

But the sticking point over Hun Sen's visit revolves around his failure to meet with Aung San Suu Kyi, the jailed leader of the National League for Democracy (NLD) party, which won Myanmar's November 2020 general election by a landslide.

Suggestions – all unconfirmed at this point – abound about the possibility that Cambodian foreign minister Prak Sokhonn, the special envoy for ASEAN, would eventually be permitted to see and speak with Aung San Suu Kyi and her supporters. The Future Forum's leader Ou Virak told international media that he would be "very shocked and surprised if Cambodia would just accept not being able to meet with Aung San Suu Kyi".

Therein lies the rub: will Cambodia's efforts lead eventually to ASEAN's ability to engage with all sides – including, especially, Aung San Suu Kyi – in Myanmar's ongoing conflict, and not just Min Aung Hlaing and the junta? This was the point which the United Nations special envoy to Myanmar, Noeleen Heyzer, reportedly stressed in her discussion with Hun Sen, during which Heyzer advocated for confidence-building measures involving all stakeholders, including the ethnic armed organisations.

This was also Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's concern, which he conveyed to his Cambodian counterpart in their video call on 14 January. Making clear that Singapore was not against Cambodia's proposal to coordinate the ceasefire in Myanmar and deliver humanitarian assistance, Lee nevertheless made the point that hitherto ASEAN has not been given access to all the parties in Myanmar.

Insisting that any decision on ASEAN's part to change its stance on Myanmar had to be based on "new facts," Lee argued that ASEAN should keep the status quo to continue inviting a non-political representative from Myanmar to its meetings while excluding Min Aung Hlaing and the junta until they adhere to ASEAN's demands.

### **Myanmar: Litmus Test for ASEAN**

There is justifiable concern over the possibility that Hun Sen, in his apparent molycoddling of Min Aung Hlaing, may conveniently set aside ASEAN's requirement for the inclusion of all parties and stakeholders in future talks over Myanmar. Indeed, Prak Sokhonn's intimation that Cambodia would adopt "different approaches" to the

Myanmar crisis perhaps suggests that Hun Sen might push for his own way of resolving the Myanmar question.

Hun Sen has weathered growing domestic and international criticism over his forced dissolution of the opposition Cambodian National Rescue Party – including his crackdown on journalists, environmentalists and civil society activists. He may deviate significantly from ASEAN's agreed-upon approach so as to deflect criticism of his own governing style.

For a regional grouping born and bred on the back of crises, the current Myanmar stalemate could prove the biggest existential challenge for ASEAN yet. As a collection of democratic, semi-democratic and authoritarian states, ASEAN has shown the world that regional peace is possible despite the diversity in culture, ideology and politics among its member nations.

The Myanmar crisis constitutes a litmus test: is ASEAN ready to assume a new approach to regionalism, one that emphasises an ethical responsibility to one another, despite the short-term costs that come with that? That said, the hard choice to hunker down and do things right by all in Myanmar, and not just its military elites, could well be the stepping-stone to an ASEAN wholly committed to not only talking the talk but walking it.

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